MONSTERS OF CHAOS

In the past thirty years one prospect of annihiliation after another has been held up to us. First it was to be through nuclear war. Then that idea faded and was replaced by another: the end was expected through a population explosion and mass starvation. Currently a new obsession prevails: the final disaster will be an ecological one. The soil is being irrevocably eroded, vegetable life is wilting, birds, beasts and even fishes are vanishing, the very temperature of the globe is changing, the polar ice-cap is about to melt.

None of these forecasts is without some basis in reality, but the speed with which they succeed one another, the eagerness with which each in turn is accepted, should surely give us pause. Can it be that, irrespective of their rationality and scientific soundness, they speak to some deep emotional predisposition in ourselves? Do these latter-day prophecies stir deep and ancient anxieties? I believe they do. It is a fact that in many very diverse societies, in many widely different epochs, people have been obsessed by a sense of threatening chaos, of vast destructive forces held precariously at bay.

My first inkling that this was so came during the second world war, in a quite unexpected manner. At that time Europe really was threatened by total chaos, but that is not what set me thinking about the emotional meaning of chaos. It was, instead, a set of heroic legends which had originally been collected by philologists in the middle of the nineteenth century and published in Russia. These legends were the creation of tribes of nomadic Tartars living in the valley of the Abakan, a tributary of the enormous River Yenissei, in southern Siberia; and they proved to be works of extraordinary beauty and power. At the time I was serving in the British army, and at odd moments I found relaxation in translating these forgotten tales into English. One of them includes, embedded in the midst of a tale of warriors and their exploits, a myth concerning monstrous beings that threaten

the very survival of life on this earth. The key passage goes as follows:

It is said
there is a land
far, far off from our own land
where sun and moon sink down into the flowing sea
where the iron mountain stands.
Yedai Khan lives upon that mountain
Yedai Khan has seven dogs
Keeps them on strong chains of iron.
If the seven dogs break loose
if once they bark and howl
the end of all things is at hand
the end of men and beasts and birds.

The dogs, then, have only to bark and the world is destroyed; and the legend tells how two successive keepers prevent them from doing this. The first, Yedai Khan (Copper Khan), clearly derives from the original myth and still bears traces of his origin as a supernatural being:

When the mountain first stood up
when sky and earth had their beginning
that warrior was there ...
His great eyes wide awake
he is terrible to see ...
His voice is loud as thunder
shaking all the earth
storms sweep across the sea ...

But as the story is no longer a myth but a heroic legend, Yedai Khan becomes involved in a fight with a young warrior, Ala Kartage (Dappled

Hawk); and after a struggle lasting thirty years he is thrown and killed. Ala Kartaga becomes the keeper of the seven dogs - and at once this hero, who had started life as a very human child, acquires supernatural characteristics too. So long as the dogs stay with him he can never die; and when he gallops on his stallion

> the lands are rocked like cradles
> the seas beside his path rock to and fro.

The dogs' guardian must be supernatural because the dogs themselves are supernatural. "Iron-tongued, iron-pawed", they never need to eat or drink; and the only way Ala Kartaga can keep them under control is by shutting them up inside a golden mountain, behind doors of golden rock. In the end, by ceaselessly scratching with their iron claws, they work their way through the golden door and run back to their first home, the land of Yedai Khan - the land on the edge of the world, "where the sea joins with the sky". Ala Kartaga gallops after them and, at the very moment when they are about to bark, strikes off their heads. So the world survives.

The happy ending seems artificial; in the original myth the dogs would surely have stayed alive, forever scratching with their claws, forever threatening the existence of life on earth. This supposition is confirmed by an Estonian folk-tale, where the myth appears in its simplest form. A poor shepherd boy runs away to seek his fortune. He comes to a great mountain, where he finds a man who offers him a very special job. In a cellar inside the mountain, behind the threefold door of iron, are three dogs which are trying to scratch their way out. If they succeed they will destroy every living creature on earth, and even the sun will have shone for the last time. The boy is shown a huge pile of rocks. Each time a dog manages to claw a hole in the door, he must roll another rock across the

hole. Meanwhile he has to visit the mountain three times each day and once each night, to make sure the door is still entire.

There is no hint here that the threat has been left comfortably behind, somewhere in the remote past; it is ever-present. This is made clearer still in a related folk tale from the Caucasus. In 1836 an officer in the Russian army, Carl von Tornau, was conducted to a mountain peak at the western end of the range. The guide pointed to a gaping hole. "This is a terrible spot for any man alive", he said. "Down there lies the giant Dakhkal, bound with seven iron chains. His sword lies near but he can't reach it. That's why he rattles his chains and makes the earth shake all the way from one sea to the other. But one day his time will come, he will grasp his sword and break his chains, and go out to kill off all mankind."

The Caucasus is volcanic, and that no doubt accounts for some of the details - the giant in the hole, rattling his chains. Yet this giant is more than simply a personification of a volcano. Like the dogs of the Abakan Tartars two and a half thousand miles further east, or the dogs of the Estonians one and a half thousand miles to the north-west, he is a chaos-monster which, if once it breaks loose, will try to destroy the world. And unlike the dogs, he cannot be fended off for ever; sooner or later his day will come. Even more vividly than the dogs, he embodies a great human fear: that in the end chaos will burst forth.

These dogs and giants in their mountain prisons are little known, but they have illustrious relatives. These are the serpents, dragons and sea-monsters that figure in some of the major religions of Asia and Europe. For these too symbolise the forces of chaos - suppressed, contained, but still striving to free themselves and devastate the world.

It is likely that all these monsters originated in seasonal rituals in which a god fought and defeated a dragon, and thereby enabled the year to proceed and to bring in a new lease of life. But with the

development of a more speculative habit of mind, the fight between god and dragon took on a new meaning. It was moved back in time, so that it was imagined as having taken place at the beginning of the present order; the world was created in a struggle against the chaos-monster.

Most of the religions of the Ancient Near East included a variant of this basic myth. In the Sumerian world-view, the monster Asag let the subterranean waters rise and threaten the land. The god Ninurta overthrew and bound Asag, set a protective wall of mountains around the land, and confined the unruly waters between the banks of the River Tigris. The other great Babylonian civilization, the Akkadian, produced several versions of the myth. Here the god Marduk vanquishes a marine monster, sometimes identified as a female being called Tiamat, sometimes as a raging dragon with six or seven heads. In an Indian version, the god Indra fights the serpent Vrita and so forces back the overflowing waters of the western and eastern oceans. Greece too knew a derivative of the myth. Hesiod and Aeschylus tell how Zeus overcame a dragon called Typhon. This monster had a hundred heads, all breathing fire. It lived in the sea, where it caused storms and squalls, endangering the lives of sailors. In the end it became so overweening that it challenged the sovereignty of Zeus and set out to make itself lord of gods and men. But Zeus smote it with a thunderbolt and imprisoned it under Mount Etna, where - like the Caucasian giant - it continues to struggle against its bondage, causing volcanic rumblings.

Behind all these stories is a creation-myth in which a god binds the forces of chaos, symbolized by the raging waters, and so enables a stable world to come into being and to subsist. The Hebrew creation myth, as given in Genesis, is of course quite different; yet many hints of the struggle between god and chaos-monster are to be found in the Old Testament too. Here the hero-god is Yahveh; as for the chaos-monster, it is variously called Leviathan, Tannin and Rahab. A few examples will show how, at least

by the sixth century B.C., Hebrew religion had absorbed the idea of the binding of the waters:

> Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep ...?
>
> (Isaiah 51, 9-10)

> Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces ... Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers. (Psalm 74, 13-15)

> Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it, ... and set bars and doors. And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? (Job 38, 8-10)

All these myths are designed to explain how things came to be as they are, not what lies in store; in technical language, they are cosmogonic, not eschatological myths. Yet they are not exclusively concerned with the past. The chaos-monster remains in being, it continues the struggle. Even defeated, even imprisoned, the monster is still what it was - a watery waste underneath and around the earth, where no light shines, a realm of everlasting night. It is the enduring, irremovable possibility of chaos. The cosmos, the god-won order, is always threatened by it, always precarious. Even now, the chaos-monster is relentlessly at work. All disasters that occur are at its work: hurricane and flood, earthquake and volcanic eruption, but also famine, war, disease, death.

Most of the civilizations of the Ancient Near East had no conception of a future that would be more than a repetition of the past. But some had: the Mazdean religion of Iran, Jewish religion, Christianity all viewed time and history as moving towards a pre-ordained end, which would be the fulfilment of the divine intention for the world. To fit into such a view the myth of the primal struggle had to be projected forwards, to the end of the present dispensation. If this world was created in a struggle with the chaos-monster, then at the end of this world the chaos-monster must rise again. It is true that the monster will be cast down again, this time for ever - but not before it has brought anguish and desolation upon mankind.

In the ancient Iranian myth, the serpent or dragon is called Azi Dahaka. It has three heads and a thousand magic strengths. It is gigantic and totally evil, an embodiment of destructiveness. Once a nine-year-old hero called Thraetona overthrew it, bound it and imprisoned it under Mount Demavend, near present-day Teheran. But it will not stay there for all eternity. Mazdean religion centres on a struggle between the forces of good, led by the supreme god Ahura Mazda, and the forces of evil, led by the devil Ahriman. The last age of the world will see the gradual triumph of the forces of good. This is essentially an ethical process - and nevertheless in some of the religious texts a place is found for the chaos-monster. Azi Dahaka breaks out from under the mountain and begins to destroy everything in its path. It swallows one third of mankind and so devastates water, fire and vegetation that they can scarcely continue to support life. But then, at the summons of the god Ahura Mazda, a new hero, Keresaspa, arises from his slumber in the desert and fights the dragon. And this time the dragon is really killed and destroyed once and for all.

The apocalyptic literature produced by the Jews between the second century before and the first century after Christ is largely concerned with

the final overthrow of the Devil by Yahveh, which is to inaugurate the messianic age. The Devil as such is more than the primordial chaos-monster; but the chaos-monster is still there, it appears either as an aspect of the Devil or as the Devil's ally. Sometimes Yahveh is described as beheading a dragon, or as carving up Leviathan for the messianic banquet. And in certain chapters of the great Christian apocalypse known as the Book of Revelation the chaos-monster occupies the very centre of the scene - adapted of course to this new context, but with all its original traits still clearly recognisable. First a great, red dragon appears in the heavens, and with its tail casts down a third part of the stars. Then a beast rises out of the sea and takes power over the whole world. Like the Babylonian Tiamat, both these monsters are seven-headed. In the end both are defeated by warrior-angels and cast out of a regenerated cosmos for ever. The original meaning of these beings was no doubt quite unknown to the author of Revelation, yet it colours his final vision: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea". The chaos-monster, identified with the unruly waters underneath and around the earth, has been annihilated.

Revelation inspired a number of other apocalypses, some of which were almost as influential as Revelation itself. Thanks to this corpus of prophetic writings, medieval Christendom came to take it for granted that, immediately before the Second Coming of Christ, enormously destructive forces would be loosed upon the world. These forces were thought of primarily as hostile to Christ and his followers - forces deployed by Satan in a last, desperate effort to frustrate God's plan for the world and to prevent Christ's final triumph. They were symbolised by Antichrist and by the hosts of Gog and Magog. But Antichrist and the host of Gog and Magog still have the lineaments of the archaic chaos-monster.

Antichrist was a complex figure, constructed out of various

prophecies in the Old and New Testaments. The Book of Daniel tells of a king who "shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god", and "speak great words against the most High". St. Paul, in the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, utters a warning about a pseudo messiah "who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, ..." By "signs and lying wonders" this false prophet will deceive the world. But Revelation identifies this figure with the beast that rises from the sea - and so Antichrist becomes endowed with all the destructive power traditionally ascribed to the chaos-monster.

The story of the struggle between Antichrist and the prophet Elijah shows very clearly what a chaos-monster Antichrist became. As, in the Old Testament, Elijah was taken up to heaven alive, the possibility of his return to earth had always been reckoned with. The Old Testament prophets expected him to return for the purpose of preparing the way for the Messiah by his preaching. In Revelation he is to return with the mission of preaching against Antichrist and being martyred by Antichrist. But out of this, popular imagination composed a prophecy in which Antichrist in effect destroyed the cosmos. Here Elijah fights with the beast from the abyss and overthrows it, but not before the beast has wounded him. As Elijah's blood drips to the ground, the soil catches fire; and the fire spreads until everything is consumed. Surprisingly, this story figures in one of the legends collected from those same Tartars who sang of Yedai Khan, Ala Kartaga and the seven dogs - and it also figures in a work of the early middle ages in Europe as the magnificent Old High German poem called Muspilli. Composed in Bavaria before the year 850, Muspilli stands at the very beginning of German literature. I have translated some of it into English, keeping the metre and the alliteration of the Old High German. This is what it says of Anti-christ and Elijah:

I have heard tell by most truthful men
with Elijah shall the Antichrist battle.
Armed is the wicked one, war is between them.
Strong are those warriors, the quarrel great.
Elijah fights for life everlasting
he would rescue the realm for all the righteous:
so shall help him heaven's might.
Antichrist stands beside the old enemy
stands beside Satan who shall destroy him:
so in that warfare must he fall wounded
and on that day find his defeat.
Yet is it said by God's wise servants
Elijah in warring then shall be wounded.
When Elijah's blood streams to the earth
then mountains burn, there stands no tree,
not one in the world, the waters dry,
heath is swallowed, heaven in fire slowly burns,
moon has fallen, world is flaming,
there stands no stone. Then on the land the day of judgment
falls with fire to find out men
then may no kin help another when Muspille has come.
When broad wet soil all is burning
and fire and air is all swept clean
where then is the boundary for which man battled against his brethren?
Burnt is that boundary ...

Antichrist has the hordes of Gog and Magog as allies. When they appear in the Old Testament, these are particular tribes; Ezekiel prophesies that one day they will come "out of the uttermost parts of the north ... all

of them riding upon horses". Originally, the idea may have been an echo of the devastating inroads of the Scythians in the seventh century B.C.; but, like the figure of Antichrist himself, it was given a new meaning by the Book of Revelation. Here there are two visions which, though they occur in different chapters, obviously belong together. One describes how the dragon, the beast and the false prophet send messengers to all the kings of the earth, summoning them to bring their hosts to battle at a place called Armageddon. The other vision tells how, at the bidding of Satan, "the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog ... the number of whom is as the sand of the sea" gather together to attack "the camp of the saints". Gog and Magog ~~were~~ are no longer particular peoples; they stand for all the powers except the tiny Christian community of the first century - and those powers are regarded as demonic. Even if, as is likely, Armageddon was originally Megiddo, a place in Palestine, the siege itself is no mere military operation but is part of the prodigious drama of the Last Days. Moreover the outcome is settled by God himself: lightning comes down from heaven and devours the invading hordes, at the same time as Satan and Antichrist are annihilated.

Along with Antichrist, Gog and Magog passed into the world-view of medieval Christendom. And they also emerged, more and more clearly, as a new version of the age-old chaos-monster. It is characteristic of the chaos-monster that, some time in the past, he was defeated by a hero, bound and imprisoned under a mountain. From the fifth century onwards it was believed that Alexander the Great had built a huge gate in the Caucasus to contain the peoples of Gog and Magog; and he did this not as a pagan king but as a worshipper and instrument of God. Gog and Magog strive incessantly to break through the gate, but in vain, for Alexander also provided ingenious devices for keeping it intact. Only just before the End, God will allow the terrible destroyers to break out and to devastate the world, until he

annihilates them in their turn.

The prophecies concerning the coming of Antichrist and of Gog and Magog made it possible to bring the chaos-monster into relation with contemporary affairs; the cosmic could be translated into the political. All that was needed was to persuade oneself that the Last Days had already come. If the monster had already broken loose, if it was currently raging through the world, then it could be recognised in a specific tyrannical regime or a specific hostile power. And in fact such misinterpretations of passing situations occurred again and again. Already in Revelation, the beast from the sea is identified with the Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, dissident sects often decided that the reigning pope, or even the papacy itself, was Antichrist. The habit was continued by some of the Protestant Reformers; and the engravings and woodcuts that accompanied their propaganda show that when they talked of the Antichrist-pope, what floated before the inner eye was indeed a chaos-monster. As for Gog and Magog, they were identified in turn in each of the many peoples which invaded Europe from the East: Celts, Goths, Huns, Alans, Magyars, Turks; while the Russians saw them in the Mongols or Tartars.

Antichrist has already come, chaos has broken loose, the End is at hand ... In times of exceptional disorientation and anxiety this conviction could become so intense that it generated mass movements in the most literal sense: masses of people moved. This happened, for instance, in the early years of the fifteenth century. The Ottoman Turks were advancing in the Balkans and were threatening to invade the area of western Christendom; while western Christendom itself was divided between two rival popes, each of whom claimed the obedience of all Christians and denounced the other as a heretic. In 1396 the Spanish Dominican St. Vincent Ferrer had a vision of the approaching Last Days and began to journey through country after country, preaching. In 1412 he sent an urgent

warning to Pope Benedict XIII: Antichrist had been born nine years before and must shortly reveal himself; from which it followed that the End was to be expected "speedily, very speedily, very soon indeed". The saint records how, on his travels, he was followed by great crowds, all crying that the time of Antichrist was at hand and imploring people to prepare themselves for the final struggle. He added that almost all those who heard the call "were pierced to the heart and broke out into weeping and lamentation".

In fact Ferrer's followers took to beating themselves; and he found himself leading processions of flagellants, covered in bruises and blood, through Spain, southern France and Italy. One of his disciples even marched into Rome itself at the head of hundreds of Lombard artisans, intent on waging war on Antichrist. This had disquieting implications; and after twenty years of preaching Ferrer was asked, at the ecumenical Council of Constance, to stop encouraging tendencies so dangerous to the Church.

Similar fantasies recurred in the days of the French Revolution, when the very survival of Christianity seemed, for the first time, to be in doubt. The anxiety which this produced in many devout souls was expressed by Heinrich Jung-Stilling, a German oculist who was also an occultist. In two books, published in 1796 and 1799, Jung-Stilling proclaimed that the world was witnessing the final struggle between Antichrist and the Holy Spirit. Born in France, Antichrist was based on revolutionary Paris, that city of unbelief and perdition; and he was advancing eastwards, spreading atheism and materialism as he went. The true Church must flee back to her eastern birthplace; more specifically, to Samarkand. Messengers were even now travelling through West and East, baptising people for the last crusade.

Jung-Stilling's appeal was heard both in Germany and in Russia. He was received in audience by Tsar Alexander I, who granted an area in Bessarabia as a refuge for the true Church. It was not Samarkand, but

viewed from Germany it at least lay in the right direction; and multitudes of Germans, mostly members of dissenting Protestant sects, migrated there. Indeed, a large part of the German colonies in southern Russia stem from that collective effort to counter the assault of the western chaos-monster.

In the context of politics the same basic fantasy has persisted into modern times, indeed almost down to the present day. Not of course in all politics: where aims are limited, chaos-monsters have no place. But in the vast national crusades that from time to time punctuate modern politics, the archaic images wake to new life. The propaganda of the first world war shows that that war was felt, on both sides, to be Armageddon; and the war memorials in many British cities show St George piercing a furious dragon. The same imagery came naturally to Hitler when looking forward to the extermination of the Jews. "The Jew goes his fatal way", he wrote in Mein Kampf, "until the day when another power stands up against him and in a mighty struggle casts him, the heaven-stormer, back to Lucifer." Here the Jew is, unmistakably, the chaos-monster rising from the abyss.

Such talk, like the statuary on the war-memorials, seems old-fashioned today, at least in the western world. That is something to be glad of - but does it mean that we have outgrown the age-old fantasy at last? It seems to me, rather, that one half of it has dropped out of sight, while the other remains as potent as ever.

In the past, people have always believed that, though the ascendancy of the dragon would be a great disaster, it would end when the hero killed the dragon. They looked forward to Armageddon with dread, but also with hope; for at Armageddon the forces of chaos were to be destroyed. Even in the Christian world-view, where the world does indeed end once and for all, the End is brought about not by Satan or Antichrist but by God; and it is followed by an eternity of blessedness for the righteous. The present trend is different. No generation has seen more prophecies of the

imminent destruction of civilization, of mankind, of the globe itself; but the vision of ultimate salvation has faded. We may largely have outgrown the fascination of hero-saviours, whether individual or collective. Chaos-monsters, on the other hand, clearly fascinate us still.